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TOWARDS A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE QUEENSLAND NEW BASICS PROJECT

James Smith Page

Abstract

The Queensland New Basics Project is currently a major experiment in task-oriented and transdisciplinary learning in Queensland schools (in Australia). There has been an abundance of promotional material for the Project, although as yet very little in the way of any independent critique. This paper attempts to provide such a critique, with the exposition of six critical issues for the Project. [This Abstract did not appear with the original published article].

Article

The Queensland New Basics Project is a major educational and curriculum initiative of the Queensland Government, with currently some 59 schools in Queensland engaged in a four-year trial of the Project, from 2000-2004. In summary, one could say that the Project is an experiment in task-oriented and transdisciplinary learning, operating over a range of age-groups, and focusing on the perceived technological, social, civic and economic needs of students and society in the future. There is also some considerable interest around Australia in the progress of the Project. This paper suggests that, within the research literature, there has yet to be an adequate critical appraisal of the Project. The paper therefore attempts to provide the groundwork of a general critical appraisal, suggesting some critical issues for consideration regarding the Project, namely, 1) the transdisciplinary focus, 2) the instrumentalist orientation, 3) the predictive element, 4) the behaviouristic view of education, 5) reductionism, and (6) the problem of centrally mandated curriculum change.

It is not within the scope of this paper to provide a description of the extensive promotional literature for Queensland New Basics Project, readily accessible through the official website for the Project. Similarly it is not within the paper's ambit to deal with discussion and critical literature on the New Basics introduced in schools in the United States during the Reagan Administration. However, it is sufficient to say that the introduction of New Basics by a conservative administration in the United States is somewhat ironic, given the progressive rhetoric with which the Queensland New Basics is clothed. For the Queensland New Basics Project there has been some critical comment from Lankshear (1998) and Doecke (2002), pointing out, respectively, the techno-rationalist nature of the Project and also that the Project relies upon a deficit model of teaching. It does seem fair to say that there has yet to be any general and independent critique of the Project within critical literature. This paper therefore aims at commencing a process of addressing this gap in research, through overview of the six critical issues for the Project.

The first critical issue for consideration is the transdisciplinary focus of the Project. In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on transdisciplinary (and interdisciplinary) research within tertiary education, as researchers and intellectuals struggle to develop problem-oriented strategies for teaching and research. However, whether such a transdisciplinary approach is appropriate to school education is entirely another question. The in-house literature for the Project continually claims that it is intended that there be no diminution of commitment to traditional disciplines. Yet it is difficult to see how this could be so, given the finite number of school hours, and given the continual problem of curriculum overload. If there is a substantial amount of time committed to the completion of transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary tasks, then there must perforce be less time available for training in the traditional disciplines.

A second issue for the Project is the arguably instrumentalist nature of the Project. Education is seen as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself, as long espoused by liberal education. One of the recurrent themes within the Project is that curriculum change is necessary now in order to ensure that students are employable in the future. However, it is interesting to ask why the writers and developers of the Project believe this is so. What evidence is there that the current disciplinary framework will not be able to ensure the employability of students within the workforce of the future? There is none (and indeed as we are dealing with the future there can be no such evidence). It is perhaps not too cynical to suggest that the real motivation behind the Project is a political response to the high levels of structural unemployment. The assumption is that we have high structural unemployment and underemployment because schools (and teachers) are supposedly not doing their job. Therefore we need a curriculum fix, or so the argument goes. [1/2]

A third critical issue for the Project is the highly predictive element within the Project, in that the Project suggests that we should be training students for the challenges they will be facing ten years from now. This is a statement that sounds plausible on the surface. However, the problem is predicting exactly what skills will be required ten years from now. The writers and developers of the New Basics Project seem to have lost sight of the insight that the one certainty within the current era is that of change. For instance, one theme of the Project is that in recent years there has been a trend away from reliance on manual skills and towards a reliance on intellectual skills. However, there is simply no way that we can assume that this will necessarily be the case in the future. Indeed, according to many social and environmental scenarios, within ten years time there will be a widespread need for skills of self-sufficiency. If we want to play the predictive game, there is a case that we should be emphasizing fundamental manual skills within schools, such as basic agriculture and carpentry, rather than focusing on high technology. The point is that the predictive game is an extremely precarious one to play, and is not an effective way to organize the school curriculum.

A fourth critical issue for the New Basics Project is that it represents an extremely behaviouristic (and indeed corporatist) view of education. The school student is perceived as a commodity or entity to be processed. Education is conceived as teaching individuals how to do things. Obviously how to do things (skill building) is an important element within education. However, education is much more than this. Education is about who we are as persons, and about relationships. There is a personal

element that seems to be much lacking within the vision of the New Basics Project. The language of the Project emphasizes the importance of “productive pedagogies”, of “intentional focus”, and, of course, of “outcomes”. It is a highly techno-rationalist language. Ultimately, such an emphasis is potentially alienating, as, within such a view of education, persons become reduced to things, and the goal of education is reduced to how to do things. What the behaviourist language and emphasis of the Project tends to ignore is that *who we are* is just as important (if not more important) than *what we do*. The irony of this is that it is the development of character and the development of virtues that are quite crucial in how we cope with an uncertain future.

The fifth critical issue for the New Basics Project is the reductionism implicit within the Project. The way to elucidate this is simply to examine the notion of “the basics” and why curriculum planners should seek to emphasize this. If there is an entity within education which we deem “basics” then there should logically be an element within education that must be “non-basic”. If there were not some part of the school curriculum that is non-basic, the notion of basics would have no meaning. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the conception of focusing education on so-called “basics” involves a process of excluding or at the very least de-emphasizing aspects of education that the curriculum planners deem to be non-basic. What then do the developers of the New Basics Project deem to be the non-basics of education? This is not articulated within any of the official promotional material, as clearly this is not something that curriculum planners would seek to publicize. However, it would be fair to say that those elements of education that are not essential to the instrumentalist and technicist view of education that undergirds the Project are subtly regarded as non-basic and de-emphasized.

The final critical issue for the New Basics Project is that the Project remains a centrally mandated curriculum initiative. This is not to deny there has been quite extensive consultation with teachers and the community in the previous years, or to deny the extensive trialling of the Project. In addition, individual classroom teachers have been seconded to work with the Government on the development of the Project. Nevertheless, for all that, the Project remains a curriculum initiative that is *not* school-based curriculum development. The problem with such centrally mandated curriculum initiatives is that they simply have low prospects of success. The reason is that, within such initiatives, one is involved in a process of telling teachers what to do. In a sense, a centrally mandated process of curriculum development reflects the gradual deprofessionalization and deskilling of teaching as a profession, in that, with a centrally mandated curriculum initiative, the process of curriculum development is taken out of the hands of teachers and placed within the hands of specialist curriculum personnel. The teacher then becomes merely the implementer of a curriculum, designed by others. Teachers are fundamental to the teaching process. Strangely enough, the New Basics Project tends not to recognize this, at least in as much as the *raison d'être* of the Project is that it is assumed that teachers cannot be trusted with their own curriculum development (otherwise there would be no such thing as the Project).

The above are just six critical issues of concern with the Queensland New Basics Project identified for this essay. These issues are important for leaders at all levels to consider, as a large education system such as Education Queensland moves towards a potential long-term commitment with the New Basics. Decisions regarding any

widespread adoption of New Basics will be made by politicians, although, as always, it will be teachers and educational leaders who will be implementing such educational changes. It is precisely this situation which makes debate and analysis by teachers and educational leaders so important. Hopefully, any decisions regarding New Basics in the near future will be made in the context of such critical debate by educational leaders and teachers.

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[End 2]